

Review Article

Faces in the Crowd: Directions in Romantic Studies

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Sonia Hofkosh, *Sexual Politics and the Romantic Author*, Cambridge University Press, 1998, pp. xii + 188, £35; Anne Janowitz, *Lyric and Labour in the Romantic Tradition*, Cambridge University Press, 1998, pp. xii + 278, £35; Jacqueline M. Labbe, *Romantic Visualities: Landscape, Gender and Romanticism*, Macmillan, 1998, pp. xxii + 222, £40; Tilottama Rajan and Julia M. Wright, *Romanticism, History, and the Possibilities of Genre*, Cambridge University Press, 1998, pp. xiv + 291, £40.

My five-year-old son has several books in a series called *Where's Wally?* These consist of a number of large, extremely detailed pictures, packed with tiny cartoon characters, on a variety of themes. The object is to locate Wally, and several other regular characters, in each overcrowded scene. The exercise is not dissimilar to hunting for references to the major Romantic poets in much recent work on British Romanticism, of which the four books reviewed in the present essay provide a reliable cross-section. In Tilottama Rajan and Julia M. Wright's collection of essays on Romanticism and 'the possibilities of genre', for example, a short piece by Don Bialostosky on *Lyrical Ballads* and an essay by Jerome McGann linking Byron to the sentimental tradition are all there is for Romantic traditionalists, despite the genre-bending experiments of the other canonical poets. Anne Janowitz writes in her introduction to *Lyric and Labour in the Romantic Tradition* of how the recovery of an ever-expanding and ever-more-diverse set of texts from the Romantic period – women's poetry, heterogeneous novels, prophetic writings, radical propaganda – has partially occluded 'the male

solitary poet wandering the countryside' (3) who previously monopolised our literary-historical attention. Ironically, it is Janowitz herself who, among the critics represented here, is least embarrassed at paying respect to the traditional big names, offering powerful new interpretations of the politics of William Wordsworth's and Percy Shelley's poetry.

If there is occasionally a sense of loss at the marginalising of great poets within the diasporic world of New Romanticism, there is also abundant recompense as we acquire a more comprehensive and richly contextualised understanding of the literary culture of the period. Rajan and Wright's collection has plenty to offer to this process of re-education. Among the less familiar genres which their contributors explore are the historical romance, the radical weekly, the Irish national tale, sentimental verse, and a kind of fiction which Rajan herself christens 'autonarration'. Kevin Gilmartin's riveting discussion of the radical weekly, 'Radical Print Culture in Periodical Form', is the best essay in the volume. These publications, inaugurated by Cobbett's *Political Register* and Hunt's *Examiner*, were engaged in a constant struggle for existence against a government nervous of letting radical ideas circulate among the masses, and their editors/publishers/printers (roles often combined in one person) frequently worked from within prison. Gilmartin draws numerous fascinating connections between formal features of the periodicals and their cultural and political context. For example, their strategic use of disruption and discontinuous publication constituted the self-baring of a 'form in crisis', whilst their Romantic systematism paradoxically aimed at producing 'a book of the world that contained everything the radical citizen could require' (59).

William Godwin's fiction is the subject of two essays in the collection, Jon Klancher's 'Godwin and the Genre Reformers: On Necessity and Contingency in Romantic Narrative Theory' and Gary Handwerk's 'History, Trauma, and the Limits of the Liberal Imagination: William Godwin's Historical Fiction'. Klancher relates Godwin's growing disenchantment with the doctrine of necessity to the Romantics' questioning of the authority of fixed genres in the revolutionary climate of the 1790s, and explores his new-found enthusiasm for the historical romance for the sagacity with which it constructed imaginary futures for politically progressive ends. Handwerk, focusing on *St Leon* and *Mandeville*, portrays the historical novel alternatively as a generic hybrid, embodying Godwin's near-tragic failure to reconcile his faith in rational progress with his awareness of the power of traumatic repetition. Both critics demonstrate the considerable interest to be found in a writer whose fiction, with the exception of *Caleb Williams*, is still not easily or cheaply available. Several other essays plough the field of neglected fictional genres, but are oriented towards women's writing. Ina Ferris, in 'Writing on the Border: The National Tale, Female Writing, and the Public Sphere', puts a postmodern spin on the national tales of Lady Morgan, showing how her fractured narratives, enacting multiple and conflicting tempo-

ralities and subjectivities, give expression to the 'stereoscopic depth of the nation's time' (100). Julia Wright's own essay, "I am ill fitted": Conflicts of Genre in Eliza Fenwick's *Secresy*, is less concerned with the generic status of Fenwick's novel itself than with the way it represents society as a culturally heterogeneous space where characters emplot their behaviour according to different and conflicting generic scripts. Tilottama Rajan, in 'Autonarration and genotext in Mary Hays' *Memoirs of Emma Courtney*', posits a kind of text that is neither fiction nor autobiography, but which characteristically interleaves text and life. She sees such texts as distinctively Romantic, although Hays's novel is her only extended example here. Rajan brings a weight of Kristevan theory to bear on this text which may well be too heavy for it, but her case about the way desire is communicated through genotextual features such as repetition and gaps between characters and their roles will undoubtedly enthrall many readers. In a more wide-ranging piece, "The Science of Herself": Scenes of Female Enlightenment', Mary Jacobus gives commanding insights into female subjectivity in Radcliffe, Inchbald, Wollstonecraft, Edgeworth and Austen. Whilst recognising the importance of the claim to female rationality among authors like these, Jacobus sees a counter-tendency represented by a pleasure in romance, the recovery of maternal figures, and a kind of right to melancholia; a novel like Edgeworth's *Belinda* can thus seem a little less one-dimensional than Wollstonecraft's *Wrongs of Woman*, in demonstrating that 'the novel of female education can have a heart as well as an enlightened head' (266).

Of the remaining essays in the volume, the most substantial and rewarding is Judith Thompson's "A Voice in the Representation": John Thelwall and the Enfranchisement of Literature'. Thompson makes an eloquent, detailed case for Thelwall's knowing manipulation of a large range of prose and poetic genres as part of his impassioned enquiry into the relations between the material and aesthetic realms, specifically between economic and literary property and inheritance. She convincingly demonstrates that Thelwall's approach is reconstructive as well as subversive: *The Peripatetic* emerges as a complex field of 'intergeneric interrogations' modelling a 'cooperative information economy' (131, 128) that parallels the radical argument for wealth redistribution and levelling of arbitrary distinctions. Jerome McGann's rather elliptical piece, 'The Failures of Romanticism', attempts to bolster sentimental poetry as a counter-tradition to the Romantic, responding differently to the threat posed by science and the enlightenment to poetic authority: Romanticism's gloriously self-undoing efforts at transcendence assume, in the register of sentimentalism, a more absolute sense of loss. In the shape of an emerging tradition of women's poetry that sees itself in the forever fallen context of women's cultural inheritance, this is indeed a full-blooded 'discourse of failure' (281). Jerrold E. Hogle's '*Frankenstein* as Neo-gothic: From the Ghost of the Counterfeit to the Monster of Abjection' seems rather out-of-place in the collection. It is a dense and highly specula-

tive reading of Mary Shelley's creature through the ever-more fashionable figure of abjection; insofar as it relates to genre, it is about Gothic as a genre with a political unconscious into which all the casualties of capitalism and patriarchy have been thrust down.

This well-produced collection thus manifests an overwhelming bias towards prose in general, and women's fiction in particular, that is disappointing in some respects, but nonetheless is fairly representative of the bulk of progressive work in Romantic studies in the 1990s. If confirmation of this is required, Jacqueline Labbe's and Sonia Hofkosh's books provide it. Labbe's *Romantic Visualities* is an interdisciplinary study which explores landscape appreciation and spatial perspectives and relates them to dominant ideologies of gender. It is organised around a broad opposition between literal and figurative forms of prospect vision – detached, proprietary and conventionally masculine, and a bounded, detailed and participative 'view from below' that is marked as feminine. Labbe looks at men's and women's poetry, theories of the sublime and the picturesque, gardening treatises, travel writing, and flower pictures, among other things, and draws on academic discourses as varied as biological aesthetics and legal history. As such, the book is energetically diverse, and most readers will welcome its catholicity of interests and its commitment to the application of theory.

Despite the heuristic benefits of Labbe's polarisation of perspectives, she tends to be most engaging when her textual examples force her to blur the boundaries between the two – as, for instance, in the first chapter, where her readings of Coleridge's 'Reflections on Having Left a Place of Retirement' and Charlotte Smith's *Elegiac Sonnets* and 'Beachy Head' require more flexible employment of the categories. In places her argument follows an already well-beaten track. Her exhaustive documentation of the masculine properties of the sublime and the gender-bending character of the picturesque, for example, are amply rehearsed in modern criticism; and her critique of Joshua Reynolds's anti-detailism in art, with its corollary promotion of masculine form asserting itself on the material body of feminine nature, has been expertly anticipated by Naomi Schor, as Labbe herself acknowledges. This is not to suggest that her exegeses are not well mounted, nor that some of her illustrative material, such as the art of Mary Delany, is not refreshingly unfamiliar (to this reviewer, at any rate). What is a little more worrying is the limited range of primary texts that is drawn upon in each sector of Labbe's various arguments: this often seems too slender to support the theoretical claims being made. In her fourth chapter, for example, Labbe turns to travel writing, where the prospect view becomes a metaphor for generalised, objective commentary and the landscape view figures subjective, individualised perceptions. Although Labbe looks at tours by Ann Radcliffe, Mary Wollstonecraft, Sarah Murray and Helen Maria Williams, the core of her argument is a fierce counterfacing of Priscilla Wakefield's *A Family Tour* and William Wordsworth's *Guide to the Lakes*. There is insufficient recognition

in this one-sided debate of alternative strands in late eighteenth-/early nineteenth-century travel writing, such as the sentimental tradition beginning with Sterne (which would certainly complicate the harsh gendered opposition) or narratives of voyages and colonial travel. The view that women's travel writing avoids observation and analysis, rejects 'factual findings' and emphasises 'self-exploration' (116), and is in these respects diametrically opposed to men's work in the genre, does not stand up against a wider reading in the heterogeneous field of Romantic travel. Also discomfiting is a somewhat insistent and intolerant reverse gender-bias: the book repeatedly castigates masculine ways of seeing, such as the authoritative and proprietary eye with which Wordsworth is said to survey the Lakes, but applauds the efforts of women writers and artists to practise the same techniques even as it values their alternative, practical aesthetics. While Labbe is right to point out in her conclusion that her analyses sometimes undermine gendered expectations, her statement that it is the fulfilment of those expectations by so many authors that 'allows the construction of the theory' underpinning the book cannot help but suggest the thought that little was allowed to stand in the way of that construction project.

However, among the books reviewed here the palm for overtheorisation on a scanty empirical basis goes to Sonia Hofkosh's *Sexual Politics and the Romantic Author*. Comprising six largely self-standing chapters, four of which have previously been published in essay form, this presents itself as a multi-faceted study of the role of gender in Romantic conceptions of authorship, in the contemporary literary marketplace, and in author-centred critical histories of Romanticism. Hofkosh is equally concerned with women as material readers and writers and with rhetorical figurations of women and femininity. Two examples will demonstrate the strengths and weaknesses of her approach. One chapter is concerned with how Byron's assumption of traditional masculine and aristocratic literary authority is compromised by changes in the marketplace which confer on it the properties of a wayward, class-indifferent femininity (of which the prostitute and the gypsy-woman are the key symbols). This argument is largely built on a couple of short passages from Byron's letters and some dubious analogising between Byron's sexual and literary ambitions. Nevertheless, the overlappings of writing, politics and the erotic are argued vigorously and sometimes entertainingly, and Hofkosh does put an interesting spin on Byron's contradictory relations to the reading public: Byron, that is, wished to write for an audience of a few fellow-gentlemen of the world, but found his work increasingly popular in cheap pirated editions among women and educated working-class readers – a levelling of gender and class distinctions he was horrified by but was powerless to prevent.

In another chapter, Hofkosh takes a fresh look at the well-known episode of William Hazlitt's sexual assault on a village girl in the Lakes in 1803. She suggests that the various accounts of this incident all reproduce the mas-

culinist bias of literary history and the overriding concern with Hazlitt's emergence as a Romantic author. The voice of the girl herself – like the voice of Sarah Walker in *Liber Amoris* – goes unrepresented. Unable to recover these particular testimonies, Hofkosh turns instead to the journal of Sarah Hazlitt's stay in Scotland in 1822 (where she and her husband went to obtain a divorce) as an example of the material woman speaking for herself and registering the differences of her condition and experience. The journal is used to tell a story that questions and rearranges literary tradition from within. Refreshing as it to have the light turned on this document, it is arguable that Hofkosh's oversophisticated reading does as much violence to Sarah Hazlitt's writing as the class and sexual politics of England did to her in life. As (I imagine) one of a minority of Romanticists who have read Sarah Hazlitt's journal, I find the argument that her persistent mundane references to bodily functions are a ruse to express 'the conflict within tradition that literary history, with its investment in normative aesthetics, definitions, and values, has refused to acknowledge as its own' (119), inherently implausible. As at other points in the book, one feels that theoretical correctness has been purchased at the cost of proportional criticism; at such times, Sarah Hazlitt becomes more of an apparition, not the material woman whose 'substantial reality' Hofkosh desires to recover.

The most powerful, original and important of these four books is Anne Janowitz's *Lyric and Labour in the Romantic Tradition*. This is one of those uncommon and exciting books which manage simultaneously to build upon new empirical research *and* to engage in close reading. In addition, Janowitz is not embarrassed by the canon, but deals in a spirit of democratic openness, and equally illuminatingly, with both mainstream and less well-known poets. In so doing, she leaves one with an altered view of the subject area, and with a sense of further connections still to be made.

Janowitz sets out her stall in the Introduction, which gives a magnificently clinical summary of the last twenty years' work in Romantic studies and articulates her aim to produce a more dialectical account of the different rhetorics within Romanticism and of Romantic identity-construction. The first chapter develops this case and provides a conspectus of the book as a whole. Janowitz sees Romanticism not as an inviolable set of literary properties (à la Wellek), or as a special kind of ideological mystification (à la New Historicism), but as the expression of an ongoing struggle between individualism and communitarianism, by which is understood opposing political beliefs and intellectual cultures (Enlightenment rationality versus 'customary culture'), opposing theories of identity (personal agency/social solidarity), and opposing poetics (plebeian/polite literary forms). Her emphasis is on the dialogical interrelation of these forces in Romantic lyric poetry and its long Victorian afterlife. It is the communitarian voice that is the hierarchically subordinate and historically suppressed term, and it is Janowitz's reconstruction of the communitarian poetic line – thin in places, and constantly

adapting to changing political and economic conditions, but essentially unbroken from the 1790s through to the late nineteenth century – that is the book's most arresting achievement. She begins with such ostensibly dissimilar productions as Wordsworth's *Lyrical Ballads* and Thomas Spence's agrarian songs, moves through the little-known territory of Chartist poetry, and finishes with the utopian romances of William Morris, demonstrating the endurance of a tradition which resisted the hegemony of the privatised aesthetic subject. Janowitz does not delude herself with respect to the triumph of individualism, but shows how alternative voices continued to make themselves heard, and gestures towards their survival in the present in various coalitions of poetry and counter-establishment politics.

The remaining chapters flesh out various parts of the itinerary mapped in this preliminary survey. A searching chapter on Wordsworth, which also puts George Dyer and J. S. Mill into dialogue on the lyric function, argues that a number of the *Lyrical Ballads* evoke the complex, confused passage from customary to individualist culture – strains that are also visible in the Preface. The 'Female Vagrant', for example, 'loses her place in the community, but gains a three-dimensional subjective voice'. The poetry of Thomas Spence and his followers is generously treated in a chapter which brings into fascinating relief a whole range of occluded Romantic genres and themes, such as oppositional patriot poetry, the rhetoric of the 'Norman Yoke' and Anglo-Saxon liberties, and collectivist landscape poems – poetry, from a variety of directions, converging on the idea of the nation as the people's farm. Janowitz provides a forceful reading of Shelley's 'Mask of Anarchy' as a communitarian poem that draws on the Spencean discourse of agrarian radicalism, and uncharacteristically (for Shelley) figures the 'indignant earth' as a female peasant, 'defending her children against the social injustice that is judged to be inextricable from the management of the soil' (104).

Three chapters collaboratively explore that 'central moment' when 'the interplay between individualist and communitarian poetics issued in the poetic exuberance of Chartist poetry' (133). Within this space there is room for the nuances of individual careers and the dynamics of literary relationships to be developed: Allen Davenport, the main conduit for Spenceanism in the Chartist movement, moved from an 'urban poetics of ultra-radicalism' (119) through Owenism to the more internationalist concerns of the 1840s; Thomas Cooper, the shoemaker who established a large and powerful Chartist group in Leicester and who integrated reading and writing with political activism, had unimpeachable political credentials but won his way eventually into élite poetic circles; Ernest Jones was a disaffected, downwardly-mobile gentry figure who showed it was possible to *choose* the communitarian position. The sheer centrality of poetry to the Chartist project is a major point of interest in these studies, as is the extent to which factional strife within the movement was prosecuted via poetic rivalry. One is struck by the degree to which the Chartists were 'strong' poets, capable of revising

traditional genres like landscape poetry and reading 'elitist' poets against the grain. It also seems to be something of a law of communitarian poetry that what begins as relatively spontaneous, communal literary expression gradually becomes self-conscious, internally stratified, and individualised.

Janowitz concludes her book by looking at the work of W. J. Linton and William Morris as co-inheritors of Shelley and Blake, Linton as a radical republican and Morris as a Marxist socialist. Linton welded individual lyricism to republican politics, producing a theory of 'affiliated sociality', but increasingly condoned the separation of political and lyric poetry and staked his claims for a posthumous reputation on the latter. In Morris's *The Pilgrims of Hope*, the modernist poetics of Anglo-Communism perform another variation on the dialectic whose course Janowitz has been tracing. Her challenge to E. P. Thompson's criticism of Morris's 1880s poetry as an unsuccessful marriage of socialist politics and faux-Romantic aesthetics is representative of the independence of her approach, since Thompson's work is a major acknowledged inspiration for her own. It is worth stating that Janowitz does not shirk questions of evaluation in the course of her enquiries: readers may well disagree with some of her judgements on the unfamiliar poetry she puts before them, but most will be sufficiently persuaded to be grateful for this book's contribution to repopulating the Romantic poetic landscape.

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